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# Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Paul Hansen, *Hokkaido Dairy Farm: Cosmopolitics of Otherness and Security on the Frontiers of Japan*. State University of New York Press. 308 p. ISBN: 9781438496467.

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Paul Hansen's *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* gives us a rich ethnography of a Japanese dairy farm in Tokachi, Hokkaido, pseudonymously named the 'Grand Hopes Dairy Farm.' It is a thorough work that gives a vivid and engaging understanding of this unique place and practice, detailing all from the minutiae of intimate bovine-human relations and particular individuals' life stories to the broader historical and cultural place of Hokkaido, while keeping us firmly situated in this mechanized mega-farm in all its particularity. Each of his twelve chapters are shorter than the ethnographic average, but the work covers a broad range – perhaps wider than a standard ethnography. This effort is unified around Hansen's three concepts: *frontiers*, *security*, and *otherness* (highlighted in the book's title). He explores each of these at different scales, ranging from the intimate, bodily experiences of farmers and bovines (micro), to the community and farm-level practices (meso), and the overarching regional and national context (macro).

He opens by giving us a vivid impression of Hokkaido as a unique place and compels the reader to register its distinction to the apparent Japanese norm, arguing "it is the spatial and cultural Other within par excellence" (p. 12), holding that Hokkaido is, and has been a frontier, and remains as Japan's only remaining settler-colony (p. 3). Hokkaido, for those unfamiliar, is the northernmost of Japan's four major islands that was colonised by Japan in the 1800s, assimilating and repressing the indigenous Ainu. Hansen asserts it ought to be understood as a colonial space akin to the American West and Australian outback, and, indeed, it can be seen to mimic those other locations (p. 37). He directedly employs the concept of the 'frontier' to illustrate this, tracking imaginations of Hokkaido from initial settler expansion to the contemporary moment, showing how Hokkaido has consistently been a space *imagined* to be wild and insecure, as well as a buffer and receptor to the outside threats. Essentially, Hokkaido is a macro-frontier where insecurities are imagined by the Japanese state, from geo-strategic to demographic to biological (i.e., biosecurity), and this imaginary continues to persist.

Hansen then plays on this apparent marginality throughout the text to tease out how Hokkaido and the dairy industry's Otherness has, in fact, been central to the articulation of 'Japaneseness' and Japanese modernity, as these have been formed in relation to this effort toward securing this frontier-space. He argues that there is a longer history of cattle in Japan, that dairy products are core to day-to-day life in Tokyo, and this reliance is reflected in policy that demands national self-sufficiency in milk production (taking this goal so far as the flout trade deals with the US [p.70-72]) – in essence, Hansen shows that this peripheral, apparently non-Japanese practice of dairy farming is central to modern Japan, yet those engaged in the industry "comprise pieces that cannot be made to fit the dominate narratives that are popularly promoted" (p. 27).

More widely, Hansen finds exceptions to several of the established sociological standards in writing on Japan, though not combatively so: as he states, “this book is not an opposition, but an exception, to this normative collective portrayal of people” (p. 131). This is in contradistinction to the representation of Japanese rurality as a kind of monolithic, agrarian harmony, where he instead emphasizes the individual subjectivities of farmers and labourers and the particularity of the people and place under study. He likens dairy to the modern novel, referencing Bakhtin, where people cannot be subsumed into existing categories as there is always a surplus of ‘humanness’ (p. 87), arguing that “the individual is [...] biologically and historically unique, the ontological and phenomenal core of agency, and so the maker and interpreter of meaning over and above the social relations that they are born into and in turn cultivate, sustain, or change” (p. 131). He is *not* denying the relevance of class, ethnicity, gender or other social categories, but rather observing that in this case, they are not the dominant forces that define the social world of farmers and labourers on Grand Hopes farm.

Instead, he argues for what he calls ‘*assemblages of individuations*’ – that is, in essence, that a cohesive identity of ‘we dairy workers’ was *not* extant on the farm, nor was it forming (p. 134, 182). Instead, it was a dynamic interplay of ‘internalities and externalities’ that worked to form and change different, shifting assemblages not easily captured by dominant social categories (p. 134). This is elegantly argued primarily in chapter seven, but the ethnographic material throughout the work makes palpable precisely this contention that the individuality of those who live and work in Tokachi and at Grand Hopes refutes categorial subsumption. Indeed, Hansen’s engagement with this site for over two decades, where he has gone through seeing it as “a visitor, worker, and resident and [has] gotten to know former interlocutors and coworkers as friends and, on occasion, foes” (p. 6), allows him to vividly demonstrate this conviction ethnographically. He introduces many characters in the following chapters, such as hairless and wise Ichiro, the vulgar and whining Tokyo Cowboy, and the goat-wrestling Dr. Oda (among others), recounting in engaging detail the evolving relationships of these people with others to demonstrate how associations were constantly shifting.

This is still given an explanation: “farmers [...] have become progressively more individuated in their actions and individualistic in their thinking, a situation fostered, necessitated even, by the swelling adoption of an industrialized and automatized mode of competitive production” (p. 23). Farmers and labourers, Hansen argues, are often in-between and in precarious states, not sure whether they will stay or go, and their labouring in a constant encounter with Otherness within a frontier (in terms of lifestyle, location, and both other-than-human and human bodies). Thus, like at the macro-scale frontier of Hokkaido, at this micro-scale, for these individuals “the act of securing [is] a fluid constant and a key concern” (p.144), however what this security means is personalised and ‘novel’ (i.e., not found in a readily available, extant collective).

Hansen is also engaged with the more-than-human and the imbrication of humans, cows, and machines, with the milking parlour dubbed the ‘human-animal-machine’. Although the influence of the more-than-human is never absent, it comes into focus in the conclusion of the work, where the cosmopolitical stakes of mechanized dairy farming are interrogated, and he argues that the rotary parlour system is “an individuating regime designed to be clinically, and I conclude chronically, rationalizing” (p. 245), creating a “an assemblage of cosmopolitical suffering” (p. 260), where people and cows are harmed by being forced to comply with the logics of this system. This is framed as part of a wider assemblage of panoptic power in the mega-farm and, accordingly, Hansen also gives space to the other more-than-human intimacies that occur outside these rationalities, such as his bond with 603, a cow who particularly loved a neck pat (p. 264).

Overall, *Hokkaido Dairy Farm* is an elegantly theorised and richly contextualised ethnography that will be significant to those studying agrarian and rural contexts in Japan and outside it and gives significant food for ethnographic thought in compellingly asserting how staple social categories can fray when trying to explain unstable, highly contingent social worlds. Hansen's work ought to be read by those interested in the intersection of STS and multispecies scholarship and those interested in taking individuals subjectivities seriously methodologically and theoretically (human and non-human), as well as any interested in compelling narrated and conceptualised ethnographies.

**Gabriel Ulrich Lennon** is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Social Anthropology. His research examines ecological governance along the borderlands of conservation and pastoral farming in Aotearoa.



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